

RollPlay

GM

NOTEBOOK
ISSUE 16

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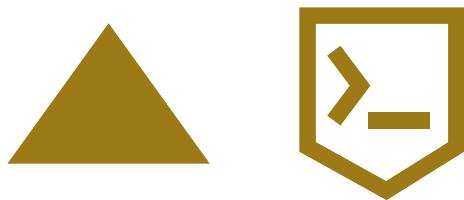
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Welcome, Patrons!

Issue Sixteen brings you all kinds of stuff for Court of Swords. A pair of wicked wizards, the state of the world and my notes and thoughts on our new XP system. As usual, the zine follows the campaign, and whatever's taking up the most of my mind, I'm happy to share it here, with you. I have a special treat coming up in a future issue - a playtest version of a micro RPG set in the world of Court of Swords. I've included a little preview of the reward system in here, too. Whether you're hunting for Utrix's eighth potency or you're curious about Inanna's beauty, I hope you'll find this issue enchanting!

Thank you so much for your support, and welcome to Issue 16 of the GM's Notebook.

Adam Koebel / RollPlay GM

COURT OF SWORDS GOALS AND QUESTS

Here are my notes on the way we're doing experience in Court of Swords, and a few bits and pieces about why we made this change. I'm sure the system will continue to evolve and adapt as we play out the current "season" but for now, this is where we're at. At the end, I've added the current (as of Episode 52) goals for each character, so you can see some examples.

Goal-Based Experience

No more encounter based XP — if you fight something for no reason, you're not rewarded for it.

Goal and Quest based XP — a goal is a player-set objective, a quest is an NPC or Faction-set objective. Goals apply to individual PCs, Quests apply to the entire group.

Each character has three Goal Slots, which can be filled with a Goal to be achieved. Such as;

- + "I will discover an artifact proving that the farang exist."
- + "I will convince the local police captain that the House of the Falcon was haunted by a vampire."
- + "I will free myself from my bonds of slavery."
- + "I will kill the Dragon that Lurks in Darkness."

The GM assesses the difficulty of the goal, and assigns it a category; "Easy, Medium, Hard, Deadly" based on narrative likelihood they'll succeed, obstacles in the way, etc.

Category of the goal is equated to an XP value. Achieving the goal means getting the XP.

GOALS: XP values are Encounter Difficulty*3 in XP value

QUESTS: XP values are Encounter Difficulty*4 in XP value

Same goes for Quests the difficulty is similarly adjusted and the source is external.

+ “Go to the Tower of Hell’s Fury and Kick the Wizard in his Butt”

Attempting to accomplish a goal or quest and failing means no XP, too bad, you failed. This is not an XP for failing model.

Goals can be changed at the start of the session or abandoned at any time.

If a goal is resolved during a session, you don’t just get to write a new one.

THE POINT: the players now have a method for telling ME what they want in the game and mechanically invest the players via their characters in the game itself

ROLLS 4 GOALS: A goal cannot be

accomplished if no mechanism is engaged. This is to prevent players from farming goals off one another and to remind and encourage us to use the game systems we have available. Even a single roll will suffice to qualify a goal for XP.

Berg (Level 7)

- + Heal my arm, restore my health (Medium)
- + Find out why bad things keep happening to me (Hard)
- + Finally be free (Deadly)

Ramus (Level 6)

- + Talk to the Wizard Innana about my soul (Medium)
- + Learn the secrets of the Immortals (Deadly)
- + Recover the Feng Yan (Hard)

Salihafa (Level 5)

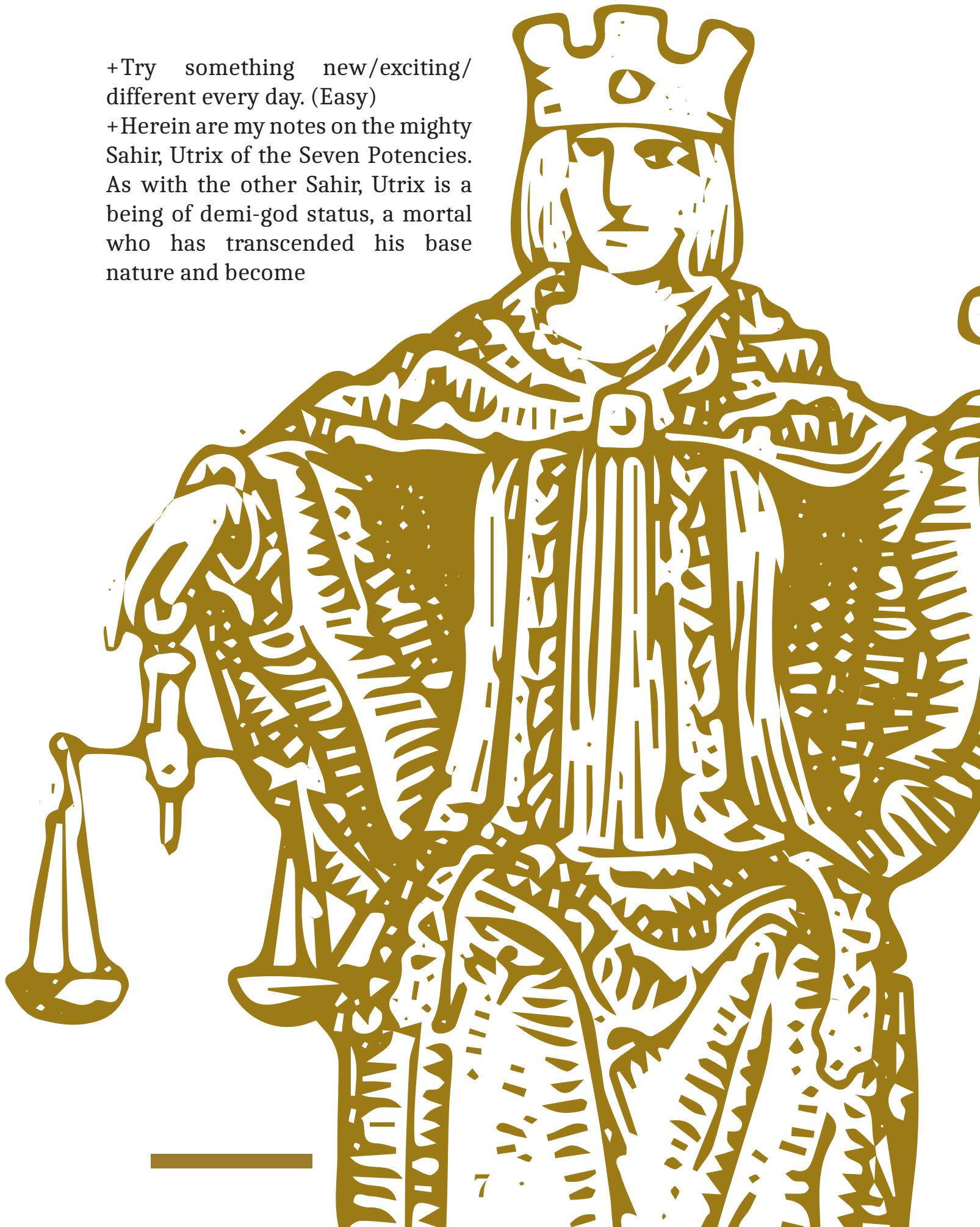
- + Find an artifact that can teach me about the creators and caretakers of this plane. (Hard)
- + Learn why Berg is so important to the powers that be. (Hard)
- + Learn how the soulless one exists. (Hard)

Kalimat (Level 5)

- + Find a way to repay Ramus for healing me (Easy)
- + Find out more about my people (Medium)

+ Try something new/exciting/different every day. (Easy)

+ Herein are my notes on the mighty Sahir, Utrix of the Seven Potencies. As with the other Sahir, Utrix is a being of demi-god status, a mortal who has transcended his base nature and become



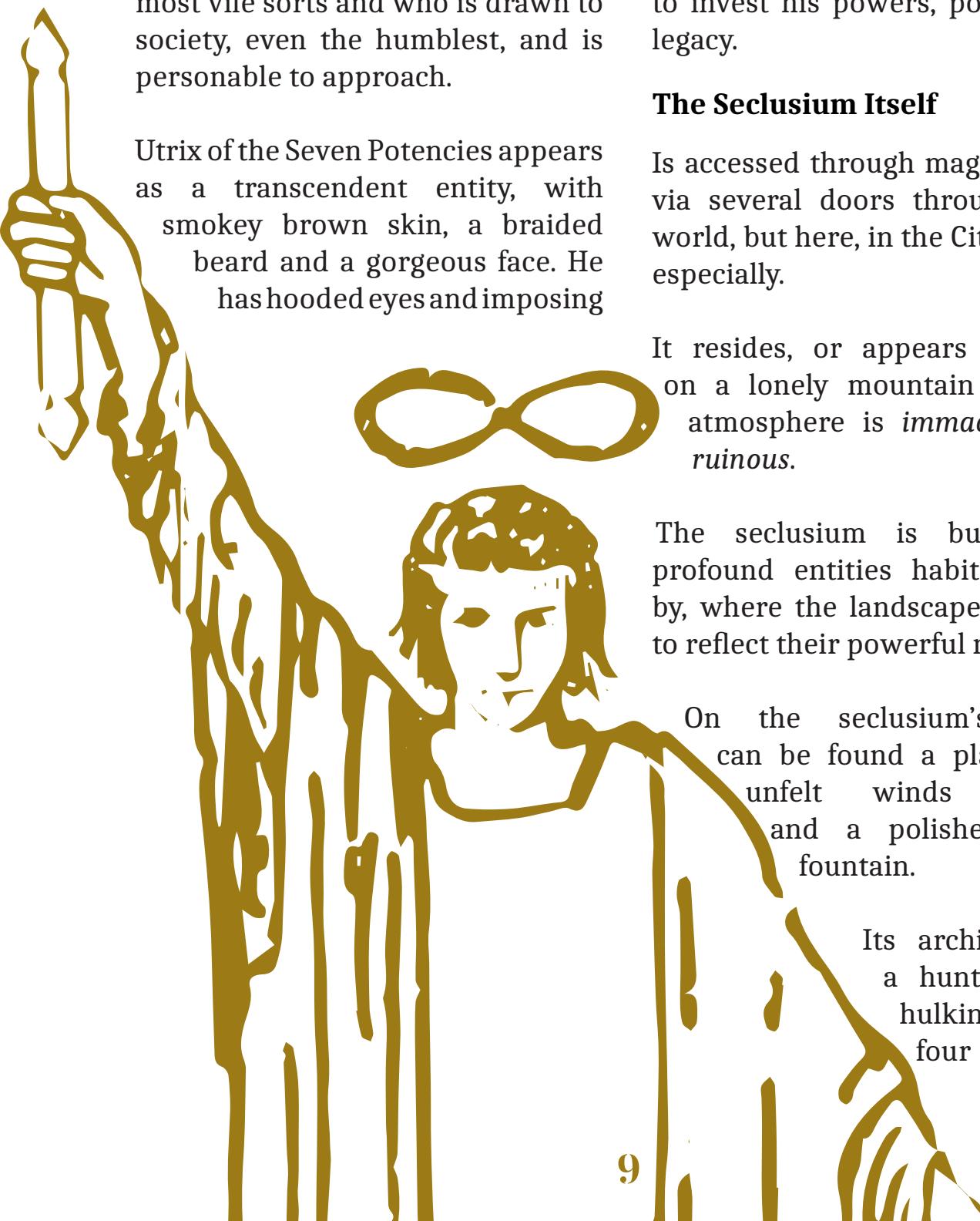
COURT OF SWORDS: UTRIX OF THE SEVEN POTENCIES

Herein are my notes on the mighty Sahir, Utrix of the Seven Potencies. As with the other Sahir, Utrix is a being of demi-god status, a mortal who has transcended his base nature and become supremely powerful. Feel free to use him in your own game - I'm sure Utrix has a foothold in many worlds. In your campaign, his magnificent mountain hall might exist in a pocket dimension, atop a forbidding peak or afloat in the astral plane. If your players ever seek to confront him directly, feel free to give him access to any and all the spells available in to the players, as well as some fun lair actions and the like. I imagine it is possible to kill him, but to do so would be a tremendous feat!

I generated Utrix using the [Seclusium of Orphone of the Three Visions](#), a supplement originally designed by

Vincent Baker (designer of Dogs in the Vineyard and Apocalypse World, among others) for use with Lamentations of the Flame Princess.

If you like this particular kind of Wizard, quirky and strange, godlike powerful but accessible and, in their own flawed way, human you ought to check out the stories of Jack Vance. Vance practically invented many of the tropes of D&D Wizardry. You might have heard of the term “vancian spellcasters” and if you read his work, you’ll find out what that’s all about. They’re pretty old fashioned and a bit cringe-worthy in places, but all worth a read. Start with The Eyes of the Overworld. Cugel the Clever is basically the template for all murder hobos everywhere.



The Seclusum of Utrix of the Seven Potencies

a place of baroque extremity

Utrix is a Sahir of wicked imagination and vast capacity, who contended with creatures and spirits of the most vile sorts and who is drawn to society, even the humblest, and is personable to approach.

Utrix of the Seven Potencies appears as a transcendent entity, with smokey brown skin, a braided beard and a gorgeous face. He has hooded eyes and imposing

vestments.

His foremost endeavours, of which evidence remains were, to transfer himself via portal to another planet or domain than this and to create a scion or secondary self in which to invest his powers, potentials or legacy.

The Seclusum Itself

Is accessed through magical means via several doors throughout the world, but here, in the City of Brass, especially.

It resides, or appears to reside, on a lonely mountain peak. Its atmosphere is *immaculate* and *ruinous*.

The seclusum is built where profound entities habitually pass by, where the landscape has come to reflect their powerful natures.

On the seclusum's ground can be found a place where unfelt winds converge and a polished marble fountain.

Its architecture is a hunting lodge, hulking with four hearths,

containing a ramble-path shifting slowly like a river in its changing bed. Also, an outdoor hearth and tidy, sturdy, practical little buildings.

Its construction is primarily polished wood, but also mossy marble, brightly polished. Furnished with lush carpets and plain rugs, having hacked holes for windows, pierced lattice doors, broad stairs and narrow walkways.

Within the Seclusium

The wizard's private chambers are a complicated warren.

The seclusium's hall and public spaces are spacious and well appointed.

The seclusium's kitchen, cellars, pantries and butteries are a complicated warren.

The seclusium's guest accomodations are isolated, set at a remove.

The seclusium staff's personal rooms are spartan and bare.

Its Magical Boundaries

An area within where magic is excitable and mercurial, difficult to

control.

A boundary within across which magic cannot be cast.

A zone outside the border of the seclusium where monsters have leave to prowl.

Its Magical Items and Devices

A frame of glass chimes.

A pair of satin gloves, fringed at the cuff with tiny bells.

A stoneware mug with a lip of gold.

Who Serves

The Wizard's personal body-servant.

A keeper of pantry and buttery.

A mistress or master of furnacy.

Guests and Prisoners

A person fleeing the justice of the Immortals.

A creature rescued from the local populace who had faced execution for violating their most fundamental norms.

FRONTS IN COURT OF SWORDS

An update on the current situations at play in the Court of Swords. These are all advancing fronts, things moving along as the PCs go about their business. Some are directly connected to the players (ie they wouldn't exist if the players weren't around) and some are indirect, moving in the background. They're divided between Adventure Fronts (what's here, now, in the same place,

on the same scale as the PCs) and Campaign Fronts (what's going on in the big picture). Some of the Fronts have advanced, but since we're sort of at the start of a new thing for the campaign, many of the Fronts are either still nebulously being tracked and some are only on their first step. As the game progresses, the Fronts will shift and move, some tectonic, some expedient.

Adventure Fronts

Kukrit on the Hunt

(an old friend has come to the city looking for Berg...)

- an encounter with bounty hunters
- the bounty spreads throughout the city, Berg is a wanted man

- Kukrit learns that Ramus is still alive
- Kukrit makes Ramus an offer he can't refuse
- Kukrit gets the A'harisa involved directly
- Kukrit learns where Berg is
- Kukrit directly confronts Berg in person

The Sahir Innana

(she knows a bunch about the PCs, and is particularly interested in them, which isn't good)

the PCs meet Innana

Innana goes to Heaven and learns about the Farang and Ramus' soul

Innana comes to the PCs with a Quest - that they sneak into another Sahir's seclusum and steal the secondary self, yet unfinished, of Utrix of the Seven Potencies of for her

Innana gives them a second Quest, to visit Heaven in her name and steal something else...

Innana offers them servitude, asking them to become her personal Court

Innana attempts to bind them to her, becoming her eternal slaves

Berg's Soul Passenger

(the remnants of a spirit of the farang has become attached to Berg)

Berg merges his soul with that of a dark shard of Farang energy, gaining its gifts and burdens

???

Berg consults with a farang about the truth of the dark shard?

???

Berg is utterly subsumed by the dark shard, and is lost to its power or the shard is purged, leaving Berg's soul safe to reincarnate

Soulless Ramus

(he is disintegrating slowly and is technically a walking blasphemy so...)

Hazan bribes the Gatekeeper to overlook Ramus' reincarnation, and to "lose him in the stacks" misfiled and gathering dust

Innana tells Ramus that he is a man without a soul, and that means if he dies, who knows what'll happen to his P'o?

???

The Gatekeeper is found out, tried and sentenced for graft - the position is refilled.

The new Gatekeeper discovers Ramus' soul and reincarnates him

Ramus' body becomes truly undead, and an abomination to be hunted and killed as he slowly rots away

The City Must Burn

(for whatever reason, servants of the Tower believe that the City of Brass, cradle of human glory, must

be destroyed)

- The High Conclave of Destructors interprets the signs and realizes the City of Brass must fall for humanity's enlightenment to occur
- The Conclave draws up a battle plan
- The Cult of the Tower grows in the City
- The Conclave gathers their forces in heaven and on earth
- Berg chooses a side
- The Conclave invades the city
- Horrible war between the Immortals and the Conclave's servitors
- Death of the Immortals
- The City of Brass, glorious and wonderful, jewel of the West for Ten Thousand Years, lies in ruin, lost forever to the world.

The Halfling Labour Movement

(after not only suffering at the hands of their human overlords but a spate of serial killings in their community, the halflings of the City of Brass are ready to revolt)

Campaign Fronts

Something Is Wrong in Heaven?!

(some kind of civil dispute / shift in heavenly politics - there is an angelic power who seeks to forestall or delay enlightenment by meddling in soul alchemy and vampirism)

The Necromancer King / the Fall of the Court of Swords / the Kingdom of Mara on Earth

(as the result of a few farms falling, a cascading problem may lead to a literal Hell on Earth as the Mara Kings rise to take on heaven directly)

The Farang

(mysterious outsiders who have found the world and are attempting, bit by bit, to colonize it)

The Resurgence of the Serpent

(the dark snake "god" has been awakened in the southern jungles of the Court of Coins, he hungers)

The Mara vs. the Fountain

(it's the ultimate knock-down drag-out battle royale of the universe - who will win?! Eternal light and enlightenment or the powers of daaaaaaaaaarkness?)

COURT OF SWORDS

INANNA

MOST

BEAUTIFUL

Like her peers, Inanna is a powerful Sahir (or Magus, or Wizard if you prefer) who has left the realms of mortals to become a transcendent demi-god outside the wheel of reincarnation. As such, she's a walking blasphemy (you're not allowed to bypass the cycle - that's what Mara do) but is too powerful and too influential for anyone to really say anything about it. The Sahir are ignored by Heaven, for the most part, because they are so

few and so focused on each other that they don't tend to cause a problem.

Inanna's past and backstory are intentionally unclear, to boost the idea that she's this ancient mythological creature, but I do have a few specific things I know about her that are important to my portrayal of her in the fiction of our game.

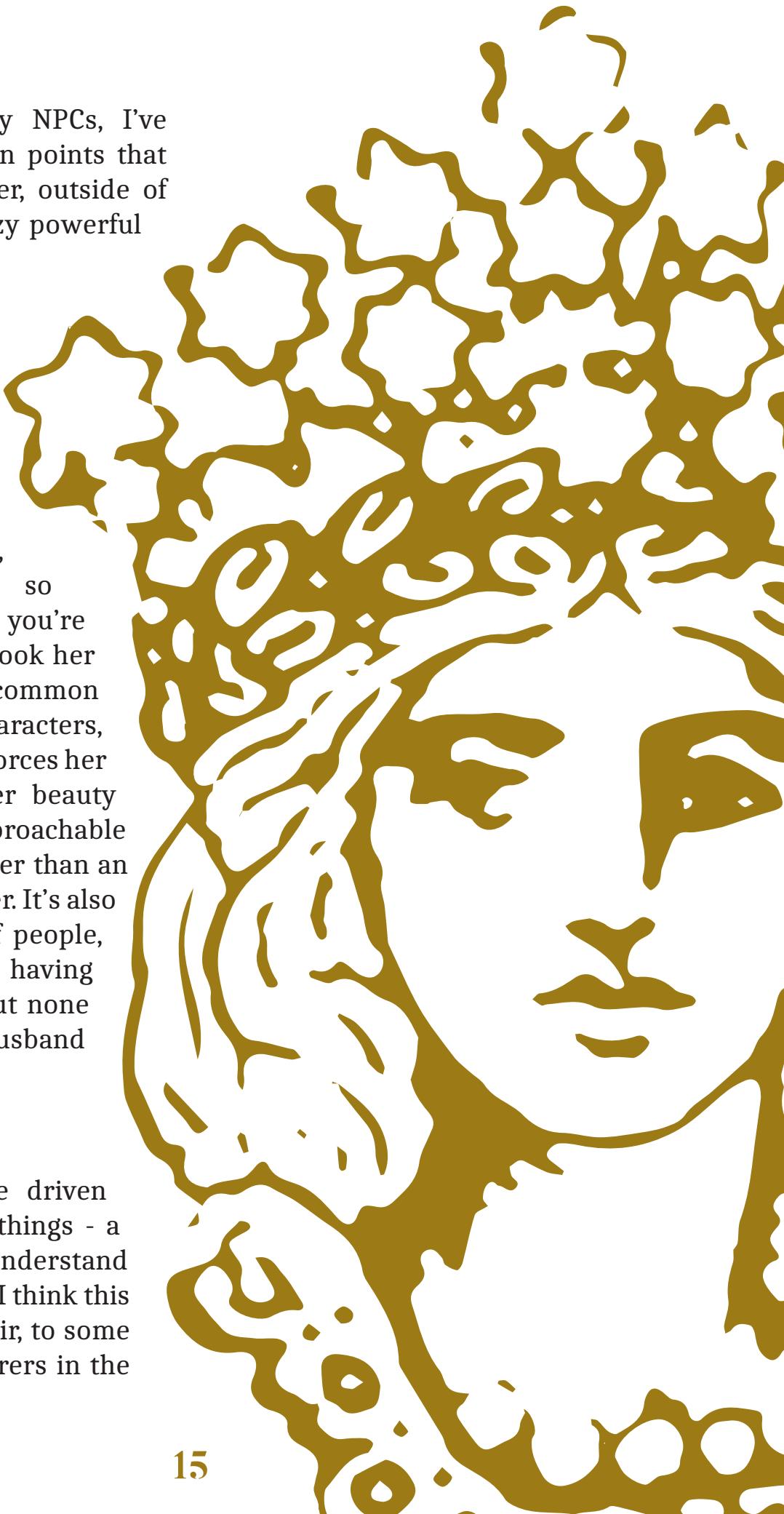
As with most of my NPCs, I've focused on three main points that make up her character, outside of the basic "she's a crazy powerful wizard"

Immeasurably Beautiful

I like the idea of some who is beautiful and terrible to look upon - the idea that in her transcendence, Inanna has become so striking to see that you're basically dead if you look her way. This is a pretty common trait of powerful characters, and ties into and reinforces her femininity. I want her beauty to make her unapproachable and unassailable, rather than an object to be lusted after. It's also a temptation - lots of people, I'm sure, brag about having seen her and lived, but none have, save her dead husband Anu.

Unceasingly Curious

I want Inanna to be driven by a desire to know things - a gluttonous need to understand the world around her. I think this is a trait of all the Sahir, to some degree - they're tinkerers in the



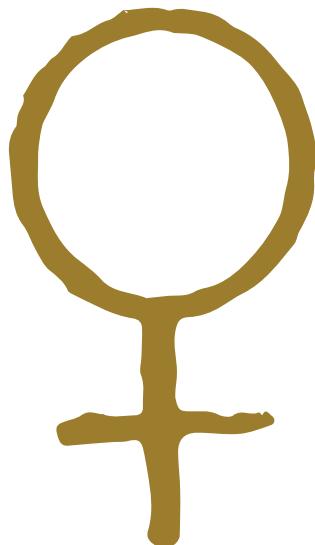
divine machinery of the universe - but I want her to be especially curious. This will help her interact with the PCs, too, because to a one, they're worth being interested in, right? They wouldn't be PCs if they weren't. Her curiosity is what drives her to seek them out and tolerate them when they act like PCs. If they ever get boring, however...

Commanding of Undying Loyalty

Inanna has the unswerving loyalty of all those who serve her. I think she has a pretty significant network of slaves, servants and allies who work as her eyes and ears in the world while she's off cruising the planes in search of the next magical thing to catch her fancy. We've seen a few of her servants so far, and I

think that they're both a necessity to keep her in play (GM tip - if you've got a powerful entity you want the PCs to interact with, do it indirectly, it'll reinforce their power and mystique, and it'll let you play more human-level characters the PCs can have a direct connection to) and something fun for me to illustrate her character.

I have some other ideas about Inanna but unlike Utrix, I haven't fully fleshed out her seclusia or servants because I want to leave myself with some room to improvise. For now, I'll say this - keep an eye on who I introduce that follows the mighty Inanna - they'll tell you more about her than looking at her directly for clues...





MIRRORSHADES

>_MIRRORSHADES GM NOTES COMMENTARY

>_MIRRORSHADES GM NOTES

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MirrorShades: S01E01

Start in *Media Res*: here are some Shadowrunners, up to their ass in hot water. Their decker just got dumped by a Trace program and the cops are on the way. They're three stories underground beneath a Renraku secret research facility, they've got the brief scientist they were supposed to find + "emancipate" but now they need to get out...

Complications: Professor Kojima Takaguchi doesn't want to leave (he has a cortex bomb to keep him loyal)

Renraku Security
The Red Samurai are on the way.

So is Lone Star.

Objectives:

- ① Deactivate the cortex bomb
- ② Get out of the facility
- ③ Get away from the cops / corpsec
- ④ Drop Professor Takaguchi off with his new employers
- ⑤ Get paid (40,000\$)

(depending on time, Lonestar is waiting for them.)

A safehouse in Ballard.

Opposition:

① Renraku Red Samurai Security

Body 4 Quickness 3 Strength 3
Charisma 2 Intelligence 2 Willpower 2
Essence 6 Reaction 2

Firearms 3 (HK227 · 5M3 · 22 shots)
Unarmed 3
+ Armor Vest & helmet (3/2)

② Lone Star Officers

Body 4 Quickness 4 Strength 4
Charisma 2 Intelligence 3 Willpower 3
Essence 6 Reaction 3

Firearms 3 (Ares Predator 4M2 · 10 shots)
Unarmed 3
+ Armor Vest (2/1)

[The lab is on the 32nd floor of an office hi-rise downtown, owned by Renraku.]

"The sky above the city is the colour of a television, tuned to a dead channel. A massive blimp floats by, its surface covered in ads; Atari, Pan Am, Coca-Cola, neon light reflecting off the mirrored windows of the office buildings. Inside one, on the 32nd floor, in a secret research lab, four Shadowrunners are about to learn what happens when a run goes bad..."

• in a sealed computer lab, decker has dump shock, target hit the alarm, gotta get out!

>_MIRRORSHADES

GM NOTES

COMMENTARY



Mirrorshades

S01E01

We could never have known, going in, what Mirrorshades would become. Without any real knowledge outside "we're playing

"Shadowrun" we just started, you know, playing Shadowrun. I'd spend ages making notes about the rules, learning about combat and vehicles and decking and magic - relearning all the stuff I'd forgotten from playing Shadowrun when I was a kid. It was exciting

to be delving back into this world, and I wanted to start the game off with a bang - a mission that would feel quintessentially Shadowrun for the cast. Something that would say "this is a world of gritty struggle against the corps". I didn't try to be clever or weird at this point, I just wanted to set the stage. Then they burned the stage down and wrote their own play...

Honestly, I remember so little about this first mission because the rest of the game is such a strong memory for me. These notes feel like I wrote them for a game that never ended up happening. Which I suppose isn't far from the truth.

Complications and Objectives

A good Shadowrun mission tends to appear straightforward, become complicated by the PCs overly baroque plans, and then

additionally confused by some twist or unforeseen change to the circumstances. It's a bit of a catch-22 in that as a player, you want to plan for every eventuality because you know Mr. Johnson is going to screw you over or there's gonna be a blood mage or whatever. It can lead to these planning sessions that grow out of control as you try to make sure you're covering your ass, except that if you're planning in front of the GM, they're going to make the complication about the one thing you didn't plan for, so it's often best just to go in with a simple, straightforward plan and be flexible. Except it very rarely plays out that way. In this case, I skipped all the planning stuff, I knew there'd be time for it later. Plus there's nothing that kills the buzz of a game's first session than "welcome to the game, spend the next two hours coming up with a plan". I like to start in the middle of things, as you've seen.

Never say I am not a merciful GM.

The Sky Above the Port

Sometimes even I am allowed to get sentimental. It's corny, of course, but there's nothing like a little hard reference to set the stage. I wanted the audience to know that this was that kind of cyberpunk. The old, gritty kind, where nobody imagined cell phones would be a thing, where Atari and Pan Am never suffered

the Blade Runner curse. We had a long conversation early on about how Shadowrun was very much a product of an age, and something I've never liked about later editions is their deviation from that age. Cyberpunk is not a modern concept, nor a type of fiction that survives being brought into a modern context without losing something. Our Shadowrun was very firmly imagined in 1989, and I wanted to keep it there. Setting the tone early on was important. Little did I know we'd end up more John Hughes than William Gibson.



COURT OF SWORDS

RPG

PREVIEW

In this new system, “dharma” replaces XP and is the state of your characters’ worldliness. I’ve taken some kinds from the kiai / aiki system in Tenra Bansho Zero, as well as my ideas on the cosmology of the soul in the world of Court of Swords. Here’s a little preview into what I’ve been cooking up...

//Marking Dharma

(at the end of the session)

- + When you illustrate your Sign, at the end of a Session, mark Dharma
- + When you illustrate the desires and drives of your Class, mark Dharma
- + When you illustrate the patterns

of your Kin or Culture, mark Dharma

- + When you obey the precepts of your Tarot Bonds, mark Dharma for each obeyed

//Spending Dharma

You can spend the Dharma you gain on rerolls or to buy a temporary 7-9 or whatever, so like;

- + dharma to reroll
- + dharma to bump a miss to a 7-9 or a 7-9 to a 10
- + dharma to draw a new Tarot with someone
- + dharma to choose a new Tarot with someone

commit dharma - you can forgo

using your dharma and bank it for your character's epilogue

//The Soul's Reflection - End of Campaign

Reflect on the life of your character and make some decisions about what happens to them.

Spend from your dharma bank to tell a better story about your character.

How much do we earn? What are the tiers, how do we balance control in

the moment vs. a “good” ending?

Do you win the war or the battle?
Do you seek enlightenment by letting the world do what it will and trusting fate or do you reject fate and take the worldly path?

What does it mean to achieve perfect dharma? Ideally a player could gain 30 points by the end of the campaign (5 sessions, 6 points per session). What would that look like?

